The Religion of Sanity

By M. E. RAVAGE

Author of "The Loyalty of the Foreign-born," etc.

THE native of this country, I believe, is gradually abandoning the notion that we immigrants are unquestioningly and in all humbleness accepting America as the standard of perfection. He used to like to think, and therefore for a long time he did think, that we loved America too well to be critical of her. That we loved America with an affection mingled of gratitude and admiration was quite obvious. Our mere coming here was sufficient proof of that. Clearly a man does not renounce his own country for the pleasure of the thing. What higher compliment could the newcomer pay the land of his adoption than by adopting it? What could more plainly show his preference for America than that he preferred her to the land of his birth? The immigrant was not merely traveling in America; he was not here just on business; he was not even taking up a more or less temporary residence: he was settling down. It did not matter what had brought him here. The startling thing was that he had come to stay, and that he was rapidly, even eagerly, throwing off his ancient inherited identity to cast himself into an alien mold.

All this was not only patent to the least-penetrating observer; it was, I confess, an appearance likely to mislead the keenest. And had it not been for the volcanic events of recent days, trailing havoc as they did into all our preconceptions, I make no doubt but the American would even now be complacently clinging to the self-flattering assumption that the alien in his country is swallowing America like a dogma. As it is, he is rather inclined, I am afraid, to fly to the other extreme and suspect our good faith. From having confidently supposed that there was nothing in America which we could take exception to, he has apparently leaped to the wild fancy that there is nothing we can take a liking to. Observation and experience teach me that his fears are ill grounded. Meanwhile he stands only to gain by them. In due time he is bound to strike the middle course, and come to see that, while we love America as only we who have paid dearly for her can love her, it is inevitable that we should regard her with open eyes. We are by inheritance the critics of our adopted home. We have brought with us a tradition, a way of thinking and doing and living, a system of culture, that continually clashes with his, and forces us to compare and to contrast. Whether we wish it or not, we cannot help looking at everything American from our own composite point of view.

I myself have had to pass through this adventure of spiritual readjustment. Indeed, I think I have had more than my rightful share of it. I not only grew to manhood in a foreign country and set out to America with all my European imperfections on my head; but I lived for a half a decade in the New York Ghetto and went from there to a middle-Western college, which is equivalent to saying that I leaped from pole to pole without transition. For if the Mississippi Valley is the heart of America, as I cannot but think that it is, then the East Side is the very antithesis of Americanism. Had I proceeded directly from Rumania to Missouri I should no doubt have found many things in America to admire and not a few to censure, but there would have hardly been anything about the change to be startled at or to make me wince. I should have understood America even if I had not approved. But having come from

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that caldron of intellectualism and idealism, where every man and woman was a thinker, and every thinker was a dreamer and a reformer, it seemed to me for a long time that America was somehow going through the world without a soul.

The more I observed my friends at college, however, the more I was forced to confess that whatever the American was not, he was thoroughly consistent. His philosophy might not be my philosophy; all the same, it was an admirably well-knit system: it would hold water. Once you accepted his premises, you were driven right on irresistibly through its windings and ramifications, and had to nod assent, even if it hurt you, to his wild conclusions. You might think, as I at first thought, that his blind worship of personal success was rank materialism, though you could not stand on that ground very long. But supposing you granted it for the moment, then everything else became as clear to you as daylight. You began to see into his insistence on tangible results, his notion of education for "life," his contempt for the useless arts, his cultivation of the masculine and middle-class virtues. You even got a glimpse of the reason why he did show a certain weakness for a species of reading and singing and decoration, but laid stress on their entertaining value only, and cared not a fig for their power to stimulate the spirit. And if you have a hobby in exotic creeds and a sympathetic curiosity for other men's points of view, you might even be moved to admiration for the system and especially for some of its excellent results.

But when you have done all this, you will still remain pretty much where you started. At least, that was the way it was with me. After I had gone to the endless trouble of studying the American culture and had made up my mind that I understood it from alpha to omega, I woke up with a start to the realization that my chief problem was as unsolved as ever. Where did my college friend keep his soul? This was the big question I had set out to answer, and this I had to admit remained still open. What did his spirit feed on? It was idle to reply, as I, in my first flush of admiration for his practical and manly grasp of material reality, was for a time inclined to reply, that his thirst for achievement was a spiritual aspiration, and his veneration for the big man a form of religious worship. The very essence of spirituality, I reminded myself, was that it reached out for the intangible. Faith was a joy eternal because it believed in the incredible. The religious quest was precious to humanity because it was a quest for the inaccessible, a striving for the unattainable. The soul cannot thrive on results. The motto of all real faiths from the beginning of the world has been to the effect that rewards are in heaven. What, then, once more, was the American's religion?

What complicated my problem very considerably from the start was that my fellow-student himself disavowed any abiding attachment to the prizes of this world. He quite hotly resented my innocent inquiry whether I was right in concluding that the ideal of success had with him a religious quality—an inquiry which I had rather intended to be complimentary. The word "spiritual" was constantly in his mouth. I remember that he somewhat rudely repulsed all my efforts to get him interested in socialism on the ground that socialism laid too much stress on the materialistic side of life, as if man were all body and no soul. Even literature and the imaginative arts generally he held in light esteem because, as I gathered, they dealt so much in the sensuous. And on one memorable occasion when I discussed with him the possibility of modern science, with its groping into the secret of existence and its recent neo-mystical tendencies, becoming a sort of substitute for religion in the future, he asked me in a tone mingled of pique and irony whether I had ever heard of the Christian church.

That should have given me a hint. It was odd that I had not thought of that before. Thus man had measured the orbits of the revolving stars long before he discovered the circulation of his own blood. Here I had been going out of my way into

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the unlikeliest purlieus in quest of my friend's religion, and had almost come to doubt whether he had one, while all the time it was right there at the end of my nose. Surely I could not have failed to observe that, next only to the athletic field, the church had the strongest hold on his affections and his interest. While I indolently lingered in bed of a Sunday morning, or, if the weather was fine, went for a walk in the fields, he regularly and faithfully arrayed himself in his best and marched off to meeting. And not only in the morning, but at night as well; and not only to the sermon on Sunday, but to prayer on Wednesday, too. He gave of his time and substance to a whole chain of institutions connected with the church. He studied or taught, or did both, in the Sunday school, an affair of somewhat odd character and purpose. He belonged to the Y. M. C. A., where he combined shower-baths and athletics with religion, a very significant phenomenon, as you shall see. He maintained a Bible college, which he attended as a matter of devotion rather than of enlightenment. Every now and then he flocked to a curious kind of séance, where, as I learned later, a special preacher of the dervish type, in a performance of an incredibly fantastic sort, exhorted him to return to God. He held membership in no end of mysterious leagues—the Epworth, the men's, the young people's, and what not. And he studied both Testaments most conscientiously, but in the oddest manner, as if they were prayer-books and had no literary or historical content.

Of course I knew all this; but somehow—it seems absurd as I think of it now—I could not for a long time take his association with the church seriously. He was too modern, too self-assertive and self-reliant, too rational, too much of this world; yes, too much the republican. He was in many essential respects a man like myself, only much more normal and level-headed and sane. In the New York Ghetto, whence I had come to college, every emancipated person had broken away from the ancient creeds. That step was considered the first and fundamental move in the direction of progress. It was a sort of clearing of the decks. Now, my middle-Western friend was aggressively modernistic. He had a kind of crusader's passion for sweeping the musty cobwebs out of the world. He had no patience with doctrines and traditions that could not justify themselves by the test of reason. He took nothing on faith. "Present your facts" was his watchword. That an idea was old and had been credited from time immemorial was with him the best reason in the world for attacking it. Mark Twain, the apostle of irreverence, was his prophet. He was not prejudiced; he was perfectly willing to accept your theory: but first it must be given an airing and prove its title by showing that it could stand on its own merits. That explained his very obvious and apparently contradictory espousal of science. Science asked no favors; it made no claim upon one's reverent indulgence; it marshaled its facts before one's eyes and left one no choice but to embrace its conclusions. And that, also, was the key to what I regarded as his unspiritual attitude toward the fine arts. The famous esthetic dictum that beauty was its own justification, and was altogether useless, simply made him laugh. If a thing was avowedly useless to man, then why in the name of sense should he waste any thought on it?

Then, again, my American was possessed with a curious predilection for the spectacular and the sensational, which expressed itself in numerous ways, and which to me seemed ultra-modern. It took me some time to lay hold of this idea of his, because he called it by so many names. Now it was "punch" and then it was "ginger"; in one connection he described it as "snap" and in another as "pep"; often he resorted to the adjective, and then it was "live." But the quality behind all these terms was one, and he demanded it of everything in life. He was impatient with a teacher because his lectures were deliberate and a little "heavy." He fretted at a ball-game if things did not "fly." If a newspaper or a magazine was conserva-

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tive, he called it "dead" and canceled his subscription. Reserve or timidity or excessive modesty in an acquaintance was enough to disqualify him as a friend. The thing must be present in the man who sold him his butter, in his conversation, in the woman he wanted to marry, and in his clothes. In short, he insisted on having the air about him and all that walked in it vitalized with a dynamic charge, or he refused to take an interest in it.

Further than this, he was militantly democratic. He had the utmost confidence in himself and the rank and file of his neighbors to take care of themselves. Nothing so irritated his spirit as the attempt to protect or patronize him. He detested the meddler, no matter by what name he called himself. There was something deep and elemental in his respect for the self-made man, something, indeed, thoroughly characteristic in the phrase. He, the self-made man, was the embodiment of will and strength and self-dependence, a living proof of the mastery of man over environment. I have an inkling that one of the reasons why my fellow-student disliked the professor was that, in the nature of their relations, the professor must assume an attitude of overlordship; he must be something of an autocrat, governing without the consent of the governed. Well, then, if republicanism fretted at the rule and guidance of the teacher, how could it as much as endure the idea of an irresponsible, tyrannical god handed down from the Dark Ages before the birth of democratic institutions, a despot who played with the destinies of men as with balls?

In his democracy he went a considerable distance further than I was prepared to follow him. He threw all his weight on the happiness of the "single life." That again was a cause for his aversion to every form of collectivism. It was a system that aimed to destroy the initiative and the ambition of the individual man.

"But," I would protest, "how about the interests of society?" At which he would laugh boisterously and tell me that "society" had no interests.

"Still, you often complain about this and that and the other thing as dangerous to the welfare of the country."

Yes, only the country was made up of individual people, whereas my notion of society was something apart from the men and women and children that constituted it. Let the man alone, he would insist; let him develop his personal and economic resources, and he will be not only a blessing to himself, but, *by that very token,* an asset to his neighbors. Give every man a chance, and you will be doing all that it is necessary to do for "society." I thought that a divine confidence in the righteousness of mankind. Did it not occur to my friend that the individual man might be profited at the expense of his fellows? His experience taught him that there was no such danger to fear. And as I contemplated humanity in the middle West I was almost driven to admit that it justified the trust that was placed in it.

How was it possible to associate this splendid pagan with either Christianity or the teachings of Jesus? I knew what Christianity was. I had had the thing dinned into both my ears all through my boyhood, and I had seen not a little of its fruits with my own eyes. From my neighbors who professed the faith I had learned that it had regenerated the world; and that was clearly a superstition, because the world I had been born into was as unregenerate as any world that could possibly be imagined. My own people, on the other hand, cried out passionately that Christianity was not a religion, but a conspiracy. It had brought all the terrors of the anathema upon mankind. Its entire history was one long trail of massacre and war, hatred and persecution. This, too, was hard to believe unreservedly, though bitter experience and the testimony of my own eyes tended greatly to confirm it. I had no first-hand knowledge of Jesus Christ, but if what my neighbors told me of Him was true, then the church which they claimed He had founded would be the first thing He would destroy on His expected second coming. Surely this was not an institution for my eminently human,

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rational American friends to cherish and support.

What Jesus was like I had found out only in my manhood. In my orthodox home I had not been allowed to read the gospels. They were a travesty on our own sacred books and a sacrilege against the name of Jehovah. But when I had broken away from the faith of my fathers and had embraced socialism, I found, to my surprise, that my comrades had the highest regard for the personality and the doctrines of the reputed founder of Christianity. They claimed Him for one of their own. Whereupon I turned to the books of Matthew and Luke, and discovered a Christ who had been slandered alike by his traducers and by his worshipers. How, I wondered now, could the middle-Westerner find anything to admire in the teachings of this gentle dreamer, to say nothing of holding them up as a guide for his own conduct? There was nothing of personal success or self-assertion or masculinity in the gospels. Jesus, as far as I could learn, laid no emphasis on the tangible results. He was himself the most picturesque of failures. His teachings had been perverted and misrepresented almost from the beginning and had never had a fair trial. By middle-Western standards He was the apotheosis of effeminacy. He never wearied of preaching the virtue of humility. His maxim of success was, "Take no thought for your life." Could any one conceive of a more complete denial of the ideal of the strong man?

The problem of reconciling Christianity in whatever sense with the aspiration of the American continued to puzzle me until, one fine Sunday, I let myself be persuaded out of my radical prejudices and went to church. The usher, a fellow-student, welcomed me cordially at the door and conducted me to a seat. He had some difficulty in finding one, for the whole vast place was already filled to the rafters. The whole town was there, students, faculty, and townsfolk, children with shining faces, youthful couples beaming with pride of one another, old men and women scarcely able to stand—all a fine answer, I thought, to the query propounded in a magazine article I had read only that week under the caption, "Why are churches empty?" There was a cheerful hum of subdued voices, with a pleasant holiday air about the scene. And then in a little while the performance began. There was a hymn about the changelessness of the godhead, during which I made a mental note that this was medievalism, and that if my course-mates in the evolution class were present and listened to what they sang they would not believe it. Then followed a prayer by the minister, and this made me look up in astonishment, for I had often seen the man and had taken him for an athletic coach. While he asked for a blessing upon the congregation and upon the university and upon the State and nation, the entire assembly bowed their heads and covered their eyes with their hands. I was getting impatient about the sermon, which was chiefly what I had come for, during the second hymn, the burden of which was that God was a spirit.

At last the preacher opened the huge Bible and read a text from somewhere in the Old Testament and launched forth into his address. It was a masterly elaboration, directed principally at the young people in the congregation, on the well-known theme of the wages of sin is death. As the speaker advanced from point to point I looked about at the faces of his listeners to see how they were taking it. This, I kept saying to myself, is spirituality of the purest water. Sin and death and salvation and eternal life are the stuff of which religion has always been made; but how are my hard-headed friends going to react to it? It is all unproved doctrine and unprovable. It has no facts to present or to stand on. This, if it is to be taken at all, must be taken on faith. It falls under the famous esthetic dictum about the fine arts: it is valuable because it is altogether useless. You can do nothing with it in the race for success; it is, in fact, a clog on your feet. It distracts the single-minded from their purpose by

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switching their attention upon irrelevancies.

My friends looked abstracted, as if they were waiting in suspense for the heart of the matter. And before I knew it the preacher had passed from exposition to exhortation. "Let us see now," he was saying, "where this leads us. Let us apply it all to our own life of to-day." I came to attention with a start. This was a familiar note. I had heard the word "apply" before. The American applied everything. What is death and what is sin? he went on to ask; and he answered in effect that sin was weakness and death the disintegration of character. A young man, he told us, with his entire life before him, with a goal to reach, could not afford to let temptation sway him from his purpose. If he wished to succeed, he must keep himself scrupulously clean in body and mind. He must build up his will in order that he might resist the evils that dragged men down to failure. Look round about you, he continued, and you will see that it is the wholesome men, the clean men, the godly men, who are the prosperous and the respected citizens of the community, and that the despondent and the hopeless and the insignificant are those who have fallen into habits of sloth and vice and shiftlessness. Thereupon followed another hymn, the minister pronounced the benediction, and the service was at an end. As I passed out the minister was already at the door, and he extended his hand to me and hoped that he would see me again at church. On the street I caught up with some students I knew, and they greeted me enthusiastically and declared that it was a bully sermon.

Was it a "bully sermon"? I thought so emphatically. I thought it was the most remarkable sermon I had ever heard. It had opened my eyes. Truly I had come to mock and had stayed to worship. I had expected mysticism, and had found common sense. In my half-knowledge of the church on the one hand and the American ideal on the other I had looked for another of those hypocritical exhibitions of which I had seen many in my native country, where men practised one thing and pretended belief in its opposite. I had looked for humbug, and had found the most perfect honesty. I had looked for self-contradictions, for solemn professions of faith in far-away, impracticable abstractions, for pretenses of submission to an ideal of humility and non-resistance and supineness, and I had found, what? A clear-eyed, level-headed, sane body of principles such as a practical modern man could believe in. I had stumbled upon a discovery. For the first time in human history, as far as I knew, a people had evolved a creed that was in harmony with their lives and their ambitions. Instead of making the vain attempt of the ages to practice what he preached, the American characteristically reversed the phrase and preached what he practised. To be sure, he called his creed Christianity, but that was no more than a compliment to tradition. One of these days, in an access of patriotism, he would rename it the American religion.

From that Sunday on I went back to church regularly, and the more sermons I heard, the better I came to understand the world I was living in, and the greater became my admiration for it. Nothing is so pleasing to the intellect of man as consistency, and the life and faith of my neighbors had in it the consistency of a natural law. All sorts of big and little things that had bothered me until then became as clear as day. In Europe the university man was notoriously a profligate rogue, and I had marveled ever since my coming to the middle West at the personal purity of my fellow-students. When I asked my room-mate about the matter he simply told me that immorality was un-Christian; but on the next Saturday night I went to a men's meeting at the college auditorium and listened to a semi-scientific sermon on the evils of promiscuous sex-relations, and heard not a word about immorality. As far as the preacher's utterances were concerned one might conclude that there was nothing inherently wrong in illicit love or even in misleading an innocent girl. What he brought home

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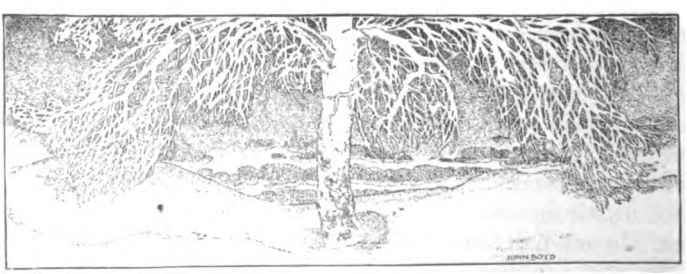
to his audience was the unmanliness of the thing, its tendency to vitiate the character of the offender, and its effect on his chances for success in life.

What was true of sex impurity was also true, in a minor measure, of cigarette-smoking and in a vastly greater measure of intemperance. I knew that I had made myself unpopular with the boys who lived in the house with me because I was in the habit of taking a cigarette after meals, but I could not see the ground of their objection. It was doing me no harm, and as I never smoked in the house, it could certainly not be offensive to them personally. Well, I got my answer toward the end of my freshman year, when I was invited to attend a "chalk-talk" in the basement of the Methodist church. The performer, with a face that suggested at once a circus clown and an efficiency engineer, drew several sketches on an improvised blackboard designed to illustrate the dreadful career and fate of the cigarette-smoker. The first showed a dapper young man on the street corner blowing rings; the last represented nothing but a mound and a tombstone in the potter's field; and between the two was a scene in a bar-room, a ragged beggar, and a disreputable old man asleep in the gutter. The moral was clear.

There were no end of this curious kind of semi-secular meeting, and I went to them all. They furnished me with the clearest commentary on the religion of America. They answered my big question as nothing else could. The American religion, I saw, was a vital, practical religion. If it was ethical, it was concretely so, and cared nothing about the philosophical abstractions underlying good and evil. It asked people to be good in order that the good they craved might come to them. Hence the virtues it preached were the virtues of thrift, sobriety, and manliness. If it was spiritual, its spirituality was the spirituality of every-day life. Its business was not to antagonize or to distract the ambitions and the purposes of its adherents, but to encourage them and to furnish a divine approval for them. Its concerns were with the common existence of the common man, and with all of that. Therefore it took sides in social issues and in political contests. It had an opinion on everything, because the common man in a democracy had an interest in everything. Whether a man should drink, whether a woman should dance, whether both should play at cards, were questions that moved it more deeply than the problem of the immaculate conception and original sin. Like all other public institutions of the republic, it gave the people what the people wanted or were supposed to want. It was as human as a boy and as patriotic as the army. It approved of peace or war as the times and the interest of the country and the sentiment of the man on the street demanded, regardless of rigid, traditional principles. And it glorified the individual man and ministered to his prosperity and success because the world is made up of individual men, and when you have saved the individual soul, you have saved the world.



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